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Show Business

They Put The ILM In Film

At George Lucas' Oscar-hoarding Industrial Light & Magic, computer wizards are re-forming the face of movies

By RICHARD CORLISS

There wasn't much suspense in the Visual Effects category at last week's Oscars. The nominees were *Hook*, for its twinkly, shrinky Tinkerbell (created by a team at producer George Lucas' Industrial Light & Magic shop), *Backdraft*, for its nifty fire rampage (Industrial Light & Magic) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, in part for its liquid-metal cyborg that can "morph"—change seamlessly, seductively—into any shape (Industrial Light & Magic). And the Oscar went to . . . Industrial Light & Magic, for *T2*.

Dennis Muren, senior visual-effects supervisor at ILM, has become a familiar figure on Oscar night, both because this was his seventh Academy Award and because he is a towering gent with lank white hair and a serene face. That picture—of a modern Merlin holding a gold totem—is appropriate, for Muren, 45, is a wizard in the movie craft of computer graphics. In the bland ILM barracks in San Rafael, California, he and his merry alchemists wave a little wand over their Silicon Graphics VGX 340 terminals, and out comes the magic.

As traditional special-effects experts, Muren and his ILM-makers brought to life some of the most famous icons in American movie history, from Darth Vader to E.T. Now he is leading a revolution in moviemaking. ILM has tamed the elements: fire and water are notoriously tough to animate, but the company managed the first convincingly in *Backdraft*

and the second with the slinky pseudopod in *The Abyss*. An ILM team led by Steve Williams animated—brought to life, if you will—the T-1000 creature in *T2*, which could transform itself from, say, linoleum into a lethal humanoid weapon. "Movie effects have been the same for a hundred years, and they're changing this year," Williams, 30, says with a visionary's lack of modesty. "This is the milestone right here."

Computer graphics as movie art form—a technical advance that leapfrogs over the wondrous and cumbersome stop-motion puppeteering of such effects geniuses as Willis O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen—is just a decade old. The Disney film *TRON*, which took place inside a video game, was the first to explore the new technique. In the Steven Spielberg-produced *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985), a computer-generated knight wielding a sword leaped out of a stained-glass window and menaced a priest. Morphing, the big news in special effects, made its debut in *Willow* (1988): a reclining tiger is smoothly transformed into a sleeping woman.

These days, morphing is everywhere. The swamis at Pacific Data Images—one of the half a dozen California studios competing with ILM—devised the melting pot of faces for Michael Jackson's *Black or White*. Pacific has also changed a car into a running tiger for Exxon and morphed a man's face into a block for Schick razors. The process can be used to fuse separate takes of a scene or restore damaged film frames.

"Computer graphics," says ILM animator Mark Dippe, "has become an essential design and communication tool. Entertainment is only a small part of it." Hospitals use realistic three-dimensional computer animation to walk doctors through their next operation before they ever pick up a scalpel. The FBI can simulate what a missing child would look like years after a disappearance.

Even in the live theater, computer technology can work its wonders. George Coates' *Invisible Site: A Virtual Sho*, a mixed-media phantasmagoria now onstage in San Francisco, tells a story like *TRON*'s or *The Lawnmower Man*'s: of travelers and hackers in a virtual-reality video game. But from the first moment, with the image of a huge (computerized) concrete chute belching (the image of) computer-generated smoke, the effects are the real story. The audience, wearing 3-D glasses, watches a live actor getting poked by a giant computer-generated glove, or scenery changing with the tapping of a computer key. "3-D is an old technique," explains Coates, "and computer graphics is a new one. There were no rules for mixing them. We made them up as we went along." The result is a blend of film, computer projections and reality—whatever that is—that has the viewer wondering, Is it live, or is it Macintosh?

"We operate in a virtual world," Dippe says, and at ILM the effects are virtually perfect. What the ILM makers can give to the film image they can also take



MELTDOWN MAGIC

ILM revolutionized movie effects with its "morphing" of T-1000, the cyborg bad guy in *Terminator 2*, far left. The T-1000 figure that strides from the flames, left, was a wire-form figure constructed in the computer to match the movements and measurements of actor Robert Patrick. Separate images were then morphed: the computer broke them down into numeric form, then filled in the intermediate stages.

away, with a kind of computer cosmetic that removes those unsightly production blemishes. Until recently, the wires that held up "flying" actors had to be erased laboriously, frame by frame. Now the cables that supported Julia Roberts as Tinkerbell can be removed digitally—and the background restored the same way—with no evidence of tampering. The 5-cm pipe that supported Michael J. Fox's space-age skateboard in *Back to the Future* was erased to give the impression that Fox was zipping around in midair. For *Memoirs of an Invisible Man*, computers removed Chevy Chase from his clothes, then filled in the displaced background.

But these effects are like Lego blocks compared with the task confronting ILM now: Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*, from the Michael Crichton best seller about dinosaurs roaming through a modern theme park. The mammoth mechanized beasts being assembled at Stan Winston Studio in Van Nuys, California, will be filmed, broken down into computer code and inserted onto the live-action frame to interact with the humans. Spielberg's requirements for absolute movie realism will mean a 21st century marriage between the modelmaking Gepettos in Los Angeles and the video futurists in San Rafael. One ILM animator says the challenge is "10 times more difficult" than bringing to life T-1000 in *T2*.

"All this is just the first genera-

tion," Muren proclaims. "There will be images you've never seen before." What he strives for is "physical realism," making the effects not the star of the movie—showstoppers like the *T2* morphing—but so realistic, so believable, that the audience never notices them. "I don't know where the end of this stuff is," Muren says. "I mean, how real is real?"

With ILM at the console, who needs reality? "We have conquered the physical properties of nature," Williams declares. "We can do tree bark; we can do grass blowing and water rippling. But we have only begun with computer-generated humans." At the moment, special-effects ex-

perts have trouble making the skin look authentic, and, as Williams notes, "hair is hard." Not to worry; just to wait. "A real human being—I think we'll get it," he says. "Not much is impossible."

But much of it is spooky. There is already talk of a movie using a computer-generated Marilyn Monroe. Predicts Williams: "Long-dead Presidents will be on TV, computer generated, giving speeches. Actors who died 50 years ago will be starring next to contemporary actors. We could even create actors who have never been born—guys you don't have to pay points to or give trailers to. It *will* happen. And," he says, glancing around the ILM lab, "it will probably happen here."

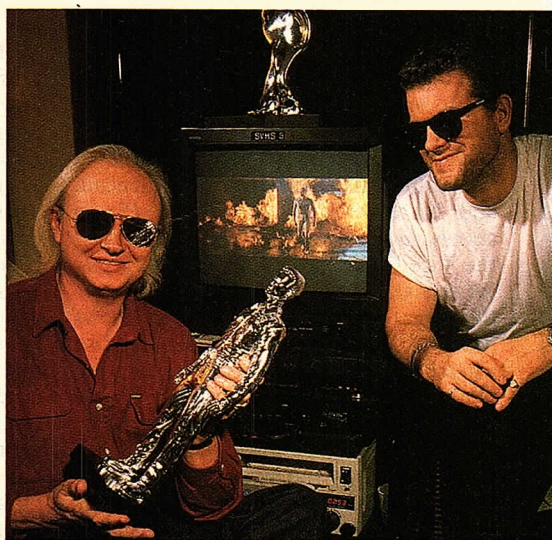
Lest this young Einstein sound like a young Frankenstein, Williams adds that computer graphics can help make only better-looking movies, not better ones. "Essentially, this is another form of pencil," he says. "If it's in the hands of someone who can't draw, then it can't draw."

And Muren, the benign sorcerer, would like to teach the world to draw. He came late to computer graphics, taking a sabbatical in 1990 to learn the vocabulary. "Now I want kids to come up learning this stuff. I want everybody to think, 'Jeez, if he can do it, I can do it.'"

Why do you want that, O Merlin of the movies? "So they will grow up to make neater films for me to see later on."

—Reported by David S.

Jackson/San Rafael



The sorcerer (Muren) and his star apprentice (Williams)

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THE PLAYER Directed by Robert Altman; Screenplay by Michael Tolkin

By RICHARD CORLISS

Was *Citizen Kane* a box-office blockbuster? Did Jean Renoir get gross profit points on *La Grande Illusion*? And Fellini, did he go way over budget on *8½*?

The answers are No, No, and Who cares. Generations of directors, on Hollywood's movie-factory treadmill and in Europe's atelier system, made movies without having to fret that \$100 million was

ality because "all rumors are true." An executive will go to A.A. meetings not because he is an alcoholic but because "that's where all the deals are being made." Michael Tolkin's script abounds in such cynical wisdom, but it never loses an appreciation for the grace with which these snakes consume their victims. Robert Altman, whom Hollywood has both favored (in his *M*A*S*H* days) and dismissed (over the past decade), directs the bright carnage with an assurance that only a hard-hided survivor can provide. He is like St. Sebastian, plucking the arrows from his body and flinging them back, like gentle javelins, at the infidels.

The Player has already caused a stir in Hollywood, thanks to its smart tone, its veiled references to industry figures and its imposing cast of walk-on stars (dozens, and big ones). Will this all seem too insidey to the public? Maybe not. The decade-long spotlighting of the movie industry—on *Entertainment Tonight*, in newspapers and best sellers—has taught the mass audience that film production is a spectator sport. Like any other modern sport, it trades in money and celebrity, scandal and sex appeal; it has big winners and losers, all playing for high stakes, which they are happy to drive into their opponents' little black hearts. To them, Griffin Mill



All rumors are true: player (Robbins) and prey (Scacchi)

riding on the outcome. And generations of moviegoers were privileged to sit in the innocence of a dark theater without having to study the list of weekend grosses like a tout sheet. Who knew, back then, what pictures hit and what flopped?

Griffin Mill, the hero of the delicate and corrosive new movie *The Player*, knows and cares. Mill (Tim Robbins) is the Vice President in Charge of Abusing Writers at a Hollywood studio. He knows the game, and his bosses know he knows it; he is, in the parlance, a player. And when Mill receives threatening notes from one of his writers, he can play rough. He tracks down a suspect (Vincent D'Onofrio) and puts him in turnaround. He immediately woos the writer's tawny girlfriend (Greta Scacchi) and dumps his own. No screaming, no remorse. Business.

In the movie business, perception is re-

is not a parody; he is a patron saint.

But to speculate on whether Altman's movie will be a hit is to surrender to the players' game: to judge a film's success by its grosses. It is this fascination with the B.O. bull's-eye that strikes timidity in so many directors. In every frame of their work you can smell the fear of failure, the anxiety of losing for even a moment the rooting interest of the moviegoing mob.

Altman is beyond all that. His view is Olympian. His camera, prowling like a house dick on roller skates, challenges you to find the crucial detail in each corner of an eight-minute opening shot. Pay attention, he says; be an adult. Watch the gorgeous gargoyles in the fun-house mirror, and you'll see more than the people who make movies stink. You might catch a glimpse of your own compromised self. Hey, babe, these days we're all players. ■